

The Utopian Ensemble: Collaboration and Emergent Creation

Dr Guy Harries

University of East London

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Abstract

This article introduces a methodology developed by the author for cross-disciplinary collaboration and ensemble-building in three contexts: (1) workshops and performances with postgraduate music and dance students on the interdisciplinary MA *Il Cantiere Infinito* programme at the National Dance Academy in Rome and MACRO Museum; (2) a participatory socio-political piece performed at Tate Modern in collaboration with dance practitioner Simonetta Alessandri and undergraduate students from Trinity Laban Conservatoire (3) a community-based devising workshop inspired by opera at Theatre Delicatessen studios in London.

Using an inclusive, de-centralised and democratic approach to learning and creation, this methodology attempts to establish a common language of collaboration, improvisation and composition involving musicians, dancers and other performers. Elements such as rhythm, timing, space, motivic development and ensemble interaction are introduced in an embodied way in both sound and movement simultaneously, drawing on practices such as Anne Bogart's Viewpoints, Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening pieces, physical theatre and devising practice. Following a period of learning and familiarisation, the performances created are emergent and dependent on a democratic, self-led process. In this sense, the process and resulting ensemble-community could be considered 'utopian'.

Biography

Guy Harries is a composer, sound artist and performer, working with electronics, acoustic instruments, voice and multimedia. He is a senior lecturer and researcher at the University of East London and Trinity Laban Conservatoire, and has a PhD in live electronic performance from City University London. His research explores the use of sound in performance with a focus on dramaturgy, interdisciplinary collaboration and

audience participation. He has composed socio-politically engaged opera including *Jasser* (tour throughout the Netherlands in 2006/07) and *Two Caravans* (Flourish New Opera Prize winner 2012). He also works as a singer-songwriter under the moniker Guy XY.

www.guyharries.com

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Cross-disciplinary collaboration within an ensemble can lead to rich and fascinating work, with individuals from different backgrounds contributing a range of experiences and skills. Creating an environment in which the collaborative process can take place requires careful planning as well as flexibility. This article introduces a methodology which I have developed by combining a range of sources and approaches for encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration.

This methodology will be presented through its use in three different contexts:

1. Postgraduate student projects
2. A participatory performance involving practitioners, music and dance students and members of the general public
3. A community-based devising project

Principles for Collaboration

Within my role as educator-facilitator, I am particularly interested in an alternative model of learning and creation based on direct experience, equality, inclusion and collaboration. In this I have been inspired by the practice of devised theatre as well as democratic experiential learning.

‘Devised theatre’ is a term that has been applied to collaborative theatre practices used by companies such as Complicité, Kneehigh and Frantic Assembly. Typically, a performance originates from a collaborative process rather than a single-

authored script (Bicât and Baldwin 2002, p. 7). However as Heddon and Milling explain (2004: pp. 4-5), the term can encompass a wide range of approaches:

Devising is variously: a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective; a practical expression of political and ideological commitment; a means of taking control of work and operating autonomously; a de-commodification of art; a commitment to total community; a commitment to total art; the negating of the gap between art and life; the erasure of the gap between spectator and performer; a distrust of words; the embodiment of the death of the author; a means to reflect contemporary social reality; a means to incite social change; an escape from theatrical conventions; a challenge for theatre makers; a challenge for spectators; an expressive, creative language; innovative; risky; inventive; spontaneous; experimental; non-literary.

Similarly, in the field of education, McRae and Huber (2017) use the metaphor of ‘practice spaces’ to demonstrate the connection between performance practice and critical pedagogy, and the how an inclusive approach can drive learning and, potentially, social change.

Informed by this ethos, my workshop facilitation was guided by principles such as: democratic learning and creation, access to the creative process, cross-disciplinarity, sharing of expertise, respect for the individual within the collective, and creative empowerment.

A democratic, de-centralised process of learning and creation is encouraged at my workshops. In many cases, I introduce an idea or technique, and follow it immediately by an activity in which all participants get involved. Such activities include open discussion, practical exercises and creative tasks. In this way, participants learn from each other and create material without anyone being considered as the single authoritative voice.

Access to the creative process is essential. Each individual is valued in the group and a principle of inclusivity informed the facilitation. Each participant has knowledge and experience that is shared and valued, and ‘points of access’ to the creative process (introduced below) are considered. Bias towards a certain aesthetic or

cultural premise is avoided, and professional terminology, if used, is explained clearly during the sessions.

Cross-disciplinarity and integration of various performance traditions are a major consideration. All participants are asked to take part in activities across all performance types (e.g. musicians moving, dancers vocalising, newcomers engaging with all types of performance), resulting in deeper engagement with a range of practices and true holistic collaboration beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Specific skills and expertise are valued within the interdisciplinary devising process, but shouldn't result in exclusion or hierarchical group dynamics. All skills are brought into the collaborative process with mutual learning taking place. This includes not just technical expertise within a discipline, but also the sharing of life experience, cultural knowledge, stories and emotional intelligence.

The individual and the collective are both essential to the work. It is essential to leave sufficient space for individual contribution as well as encouraging collaboration.

Empowerment of participants has been a crucial aim of all three projects listed. Through being involved in all the stages of the creation and performance of the works, individuals have realised that they possess creative agency that is valued by others.

Points of Access

With the aim of creating a safe, non-judgmental space for exploration and playfulness, the inclusion of 'access points' in the workshop plan enables every participant in the ensemble to take active part in the collaborative process.

Warm-ups include physical exercises involving simple movement and voice work. The exercises usually start with individual exploration and consideration of one's own body. Gradually, participants are encouraged to include the workshop space and other participants in their awareness. This increases trust in oneself and others, and makes the workshop a safe space for play and exploration.

Increasing the awareness of materials used in composition and improvisation is the next stage in preparing an ensemble for collaboration. Through guided embodied exploration, participants discover and develop movement material as well as relationships with the space and each other. One example of a successful system for increasing such awareness is Bogart and Landau's Viewpoints (2014),

which has been used internationally in the creation of theatre and performance. In my workshops, the introductory Viewpoints session focuses on elements of time and space in a gradual experiential way. As more elements are introduced, participants become aware of the richness of material available to them for group improvisation or composition.

The elements of time are: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response (to other members of the ensemble) and repetition (of each other's movements). The elements of space are: shape (of the body), gesture, spatial relationships and topography (i.e. the ensemble's arrangement on the 'canvas' of the stage floor). Bogart and Landau also apply this approach to voice work in their Vocal Viewpoints (2014, pp. 105-106) adding to the mix the elements of pitch, timbre and dynamics. After gaining an understanding of these elements, the participants are split into groups and perform improvisations to each other, followed by reflection and peer feedback.

Within a group it is also essential to **encourage listening skills**. This allows participants to be truly present with each other and the space and avoid saturating the sonic aspects of performance. I found Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening pieces (2005) highly effective in encouraging this. Examples of particularly successful pieces are *Sound Fishes* (1992) in which the performer waits for sound just like a fisherman, eventually 'pulling the sound out of the air... sensing its size and energy'. Another example is *The New Sound Meditation* (1994) in which listening and producing sound are synchronised with the breath. Performing these pieces significantly increased listening and mutual awareness within the ensembles I worked with.

Access to the creative process can be encouraged by setting up a framework or initial point of departure as a common ground for collaboration. Photos, text materials and site-specific investigations were used to inspire movement, lyric writing and improvised dialogue work. Step-by-step guidance or timed tasks are very helpful in this respect. Techniques used in experimental music practice were also introduced at some of the workshops, including graphic scores (with John Cage's piece *Aria* (1958) as a model example), and instruction pieces (including pieces from John Stevens's *Search and Reflect* (2007, originally 1985)).

Improvisation tasks are a rich source of creative practice for a diverse mix of participants. Guidelines for improvisation such as an imagined scenario, a score, or chosen words all assisted in providing structure or focus. In many cases, participants

felt that as well as actual improvised performances, improvisations also helped them generate new material for fully ‘composed’ work.

These points of access were the basis of the overall workshop structure, which always included: elements of ensemble building, development of performance skills and collaborative creation. This structure was used across the three contexts discussed below.

Context 1: Postgraduate work

At postgraduate level, music and dance students bring to the creative process a high level of expertise within their respective disciplines. In April 2019 I worked with the students on the cross-disciplinary music and dance MA course *Il Cantiere Infinito* at the Accademia Nazionale di Danza in Rome within a series of workshops leading up to a public performance. It was clear that the students’ previous experience on the MA programme and its cross-disciplinary ethos enriched this process significantly.

Using the workshop structure described above, all students were encouraged to participate in movement, voice and sound exercises. Through the training process, a common ensemble repertoire of interaction principles emerged, and scores as well as sound and movement material developed in an organic way. Instant improvisation can play a central part in collaborative exploration, but as Keith Sawyer observes (2015, p. 92): ‘[g]roup creativity isn’t all improvised anew in each performance; there are common elements that are repeated across many performances. There is always some structure in improvisational performance’.

With strict disciplinary boundaries being blurred, a space was created for unexpected connections and mutual inspiration. Instrument-playing gestures were exaggerated and transformed into movement compositions, instrumentalists occasionally moved out of the confines of the space defined by their instruments to , objects within the performance space became musical instruments as well as props, and acoustic exploration of space became site-specific choreography. Particular focus was given to site-specific approaches, with some of the workshops focusing on the exploration of different sites and environments, and the way these could be ‘read’, explored and interacted with.

This idea of ‘reading’ the space became the basis of the score of the group’s performance at MACRO Museum. A series of task-based pieces formed the structure, starting with group vocal warm-up, acoustic exploration of the whole building with

the voice, interchanging sound and movement roles within the performance, use of objects present in the space, and exploration of relationships between performers, as well as the audience.

Context 2: Participatory project

In February 2019 I ran a project titled 'Protest Choir' at Tate Modern, as part of the gallery's Tate Exchange collaboration with Trinity Laban Conservatoire. The project was led by dance practitioner and educator Simonetta Alessandri and myself, as part of the conservatoire's annual CoLab festival. Members of the general public were invited to work with dance and music students on the creation of a performance around the theme of protest.

The project consisted of two stages: a three day preparatory stage with music and dance students at the conservatoire to explore the theme and develop the public workshop, and two days at Tate Modern during which the general public was invited to create work with the students and perform it.

During the first three days, the students went through a process of ensemble building and exploration of the theme of protest. The activities included Feldenkrais-inspired warm-ups led by Simonetta, leading on to movement and voice improvisations. Viewpoints were also used to explore relationships in performance and improvisation. Protest movements and their manifestation in language, movement and social interaction were discussed and explored in an embodied way. Journalistic photos provided inspiration for group interaction (e.g. imitation, synchronicity, flocking). Slogan writing and composition of chant melodies were another creative activity that was inspired by protest movement culture.

We then came up with a structure for the workshop with the general public and a loose structure for the actual performance. As the three days of preparation progressed, the students felt increasingly confident in their abilities, and asked to lead the workshops at Tate Modern themselves, with Simonetta and myself only leading the opening introduction and warm-ups. This was a successful result demonstrating how a more democratic pedagogy could empower learners and provide a model for skill transferral and peer learning.

The two days at Tate Modern engaged a range of participants from various backgrounds and age groups. This resulted in a richness of insights during the discussion of the social dynamics of protest, and the creation of original, varied

movement and sound material. The participants from the general public felt that this was a safe, supportive environment for exploring performance in a playful way. The public performances took place in a foyer area and attracted interest from many passers-by.

Context 3: Community opera

I have been running devising workshops titled ‘Create An Opera!’ at Theatre Delicatessen’s studios in London since October 2017. The workshops are free and open to the general public. They have attracted participants from a range of backgrounds, experiences, cultural backgrounds and ages. Inspired by the multi-disciplinary nature of opera, the workshop activities are designed to empower participants to engage with creative practice through developing skills in movement, voice and writing as well as collaboration and improvisation.

The workshops have been taking place over a period of more than two years, allowing ongoing development of performance skills, as well as creative writing and composition work. The group has created several public performances during this time and received very positive feedback from audience members.

The workshop structure is very similar to that of the previous two contexts discussed. The diverse nature of the group resulted in the sharing of a range of personal experiences, narratives and voices, enriching the work produced. Over time, the regular workshop attendees have developed a nurturing sense of community, welcoming newcomers, teaching them new skills and providing valuable feedback.

Ensemble as Utopia

Utopian visions allow us to imagine an ideal future society. They provide a form of reflection or critique of the tendencies of the present, and a suggestion for action to build a better future. A devising performance workshop with its intensive collaboration processes, democratic ethos, and opportunity for playful exploration outside of the ‘real world’, can provide a site for imagining utopia. Individual expression and exploration are welcomed and nurtured within a collective context, resources are shared, and a group can work towards a shared goal. This model can inspire a larger context of community building through creative collaboration.

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